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The Spook
Who SAT By The
Door

'The Spook Who Sat By the Door' Director Shocked By 'Extreme Reaction' to Film

By FRAN WELL

"It's pure fantasy," says actor, director and now producer, Ivan Dixon of his second major feature film, "The Spook Who Sat by the Door."

Now at the Gary Theater, the film is based on the controversial best selling novel by Sam Greenlee about the first black CIA agent who learns what he can from the organization, resigns, and ultimately manages to mastermind an American black revolution.

"When I first read it, I flipped," confides Dixon about his initial encounter with "Spook."

"It was a book that involved a fantasy that most black males have entertained at least once in their lives: the fantasy of wanting to destroy the whole damn society after coming to grips with the frustration of being the minority in a majority white society."

"This film is aimed at the black male audience," says Dixon. "The protagonist is good and bad... he's human. He's 'Everyman,' in a sense. And I think an audience—particularly a black male audience—identifies with him because whether middle class or grass roots, as a black male, you tended to think of yourself as a 'spook,'" says Dixon. "And that's really why I made the picture."

What has surprised Dixon about the final product, is the harsh "reactionary response" the film has drawn from white critics.

Granting that the film was designed for blacks, Dixon insists he's still pretty shocked by "the kind of extreme reaction" established critics have heaped on Dixon's product.

"The story involves the first black man who is integrated into the CIA. He stays there for four or five years, learns all the elements of guerrilla tactics, terrorism, etc., and after a time, he goes back to Chicago—ostensibly to work as a social worker in the community—and trains a youth gang as a guerrilla outfit."

"'Spook' ends with the guerrilla activities continuing. The emphasis," says Dixon, "is on the man who, out of a peculiar kind of frustration, channels his energies into one goal. He gives his whole life over to that goal, even though that goal is a very negative one."

"It's a violent film," Dixon concedes. "I mean, it is violent in the sense that we are dealing with violent action and reaction. But I shot it in such a way that the violence is not emphasized at all. I didn't want to put the emphasis on the wrong thing in the piece."

"The film is done with a certain amount of thought and philosophy behind it. It's not simply a violent picture."

But the reaction has not only brought attack against the film's substance, Dixon claims. Incensed reviewers have taken broad pot shots at the production itself.

"Yeah, they called it a pot boiler, cheaply produced and ineptly directed, and I know it's not all that."

"I think the images on screen are certainly not negative anymore than they are positive. They are human images, more honestly depicted in this than in most of the other images that we have been able to get up there on the American screen. In the book the characters are presented that way. So I tried to do it that way on film. The white images in the picture are absolutely stereotyped," Dixon says. "And they are intentionally written as stereotype," he emphasizes... for those he considers misguided film critics.

Apparently, reviewers have also balked at the stereotypical 'whities' that populate Dixon's movie.

"But that's the gimmick," argues Dixon. "Part of the idea of the film was to reverse the stereotypes. I'm really surprised that most of our more 'astute' critics didn't catch on to the fact that we were putting them on. I never intended to alienate white audiences."

"Mainly what we tried to do was avoid the clichés generally attached to BLACK characters."

Dixon, who was a regular on television's "Hogan's Heroes," and had the lead role in "The Final War of Ollie Winter" has, in addition,

managed to accumulate an impressive list of credits as a director of such top rated programs as "The Bill Cosby Show," "Mod Squad," and "Room 222."

His first feature film was "Trouble Man."

"This film gave me a chance to show I had some kind of directorial ability. It enabled me to create a track record and get myself some money for future projects," says Dixon. "People don't invest in you as a film maker unless you've made films. I made 'Trouble Man' as a sort of a means to an end," he tells you. "But 'Spook' was much more of a pleasure for me to make. It was something I was really intent on doing."

Ivan Dixon says he is content in his fairly new niche as director.

"I haven't done any acting for three or four years. I imagine if something came along I'd take it. But nobody is asking me. I've never been 'hot' as an actor or as a director," he says. "But as long as directing is open to me, I'm happy."

"Directing is a lot more challenging and a lot more fulfilling than acting. Nobody cares what color you are, what size you are, what you have is latitude," says Ivan Dixon.